



"Shoot The County in The Foot!"

Volunteer firefighters denounce latest attempt to charge for EMS service

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By Philip Speake

Already killed once by the county council, the idea of charging for the county's Emergency Medical Services just won't die.

Now, County Executive, Isiah "Ike" Leggett, who has long supported the measure is using the county's budget shortfall to once again push the matter.

Volunteers from fire departments, representatives from the county, and EMS volunteers addressed the Public Safety Committee headed by committee chair Phil Andrews (D-District 3) Tuesday afternoon to react to the latest incarnation of the plan.

Council President Nancy Floreen proposed bill 13-10, Emergency Medical Services Transport Fee, at Leggett's request. The bill would once again authorize Montgomery County to impose and collect a fee to recover costs generated by providing emergency medical service transportation.

In an open letter to Floreen, Leggett wrote, "This bill will help the County address its current fiscal challenges by increasing the amount of revenue available to maintain and enhance core government programs and services."

If passed, the Fire Chief would have to impose the following fees: a rate of \$8.50 per mile from point of pick up to the health care facility; as well as, fees ranging from \$300-\$800 for different types of life support, even those that are non-emergencies.

The revenue for this legislation is expected to generate about \$15 million a year. Over the next four years the county is projected to gain \$59,776,918 from the fees. According to Leggett, none of the projected revenues would be paid out of the pockets of county residents. Instead, the plan calls again call for insurance companies to pay the fees.

Nearby counties like Fredrick, Prince George's and Fairfax Counties all have EMS fees, and Leggett says there is no evidence that those "in need" will be dissuaded from calling 911 in an emergency situation.

"It is the only viable solution to the resource challenges presented to me as your fire chief," said Richard Bowers, Fire Chief of the Montgomery County Fire and Rescue Service. "There will be no financial impact on the residents of Montgomery County...this is funding that the

Insurance companies have already allocated for this service which the county has chosen not to collect."

But not all agreed with Bowers' sentiment.

"Building a fee for a public good into the foundation of your revenue stream is not responsible stewardship of this county or what it stands for...pretending that ambulance fees are a free gift from insurance companies is a delightful vacation from reality," said Darian Unger, a volunteer fire fighter and representative of the Silver Spring Citizens Advisory Board.

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Many of the volunteers who spoke mentioned that there is already a fire tax that county residents pay and this bill could constitute a "double tax" for fire and rescue services.

Scott Graham, representing the Montgomery County Fire and Rescue Officers Association spoke in favor of Bill 13-10, because of the lack of funding for apparatus and vehicles.

"We run a constant race between catastrophe and funding, without the dedicated resources provided by an EMS transport fee Montgomery County fire rescue service will lose that race, more importantly lives will lose that race," he said.

Graham went on to question those in opposition, including dozens of county volunteers saying, "If they are truly here to serve the citizens or serve themselves."

Steven R. Stemler, President of the Kensington Volunteer Fire Department and an active EMT believes the legislation is simply a bad policy and destructive to the volunteer service. Stemler said that there are 2670 ambulance calls run per week by volunteers, and there are more than 70,000 standby hours per year for which the county pays zero in wages and benefits.

"70 percent of the hours are free, at Kensington station 5," he said. "This legislation will shoot the county in the foot as to the revenue raised by it, in relation to the volunteer services it would lose."

Councilmen Andrews is in strong opposition to the bill and has been since the first time it was introduced in 2003, by former County Executive Doug Duncan.

"Volunteers are offended that the county might charge for their services and I do think that it could have a negative effect on the bonds between some of the volunteer departments and the community," Andrews said. The Public Safety Committee has a work session tentatively scheduled for April 26th at 9:30am. The public is encouraged to attend.